

Poe's Unreliable Narrator: the Reader as a Privileged Witness and the Narrator's Credibility¹

El narrador poco fiable de Poe: el lector como testigo privilegiado y la credibilidad del narrador

Francisco Javier Sánchez-Verdejo Pérez
UNED
fjsanchezverdejo@valdepenas.uned.es

Recibido 8 de marzo de 2019
Aceptado 24 de marzo de 2020

Resumen

Un narrador en quien no se puede confiar (preso de la locura, lleno de mentiras...) es una de las armas más poderosas que puede usar un autor. Como veremos, los efectos se multiplican cuando ese escritor es Edgar Allan Poe. Por otro lado, o además, si hay algo que pueda deleitar más que leer a Poe, eso es enseñar a Poe. Sus narradores, los que aparecen en historias como "The Tell-Tale Heart" o "The Black Cat", ofrecen un ejemplo magnífico para nuestro proyecto. Mentalmente inestables, a pesar de sus (¿)pretendidas(?) intenciones de credibilidad, dichos narradores suelen alejarse subjetivamente de los hechos. Es por ello que estas historias formarán parte del corpus de narraciones que aquí presentamos.

Palabras clave: Unreliable narrator, percepción, Edgar Allan Poe, credibilidad.

¹ This contribution comes to light as a research carried out with several (under)graduate students. This research is included in a project designed in the form of cooperative work with students of different educational levels, and presented at a round table entitled "Edgar Allan Poe in the classroom: new proposals for teaching in the 21st century", in the I International EAPSA Conference, "Poe in the Age of Populism", held in Valladolid between January 31st and February 2nd, 2018. The participating students are:

- María Victoria Arenas Vela
- María Belén Casado Rodrigo
- Beatriz Garrido García
- Rubén Pareja Pinilla

Abstract

An unreliable narrator (prisoner of madness, full of lies...) is one of the most powerful weapons an author can use. As we shall see, the effects multiply when that writer is Edgar Allan Poe. On the other hand, or in addition, if there is something that can delight more than reading Poe, that is teaching Poe. His narrators, those that appear in stories like "The Tell-Tale Heart" or "The Black Cat" offer a magnificent example for our project. Mentally unstable, despite their (intended?) intentions of reliability, these narrators often move away subjectively from the facts. That is why these stories will be part of the corpus of narratives that we present here.

Key words: Unreliable narrator, perception, Edgar Allan Poe, credibility.

1. INTRODUCTION

The narrative technique of unreliable narration was first coined by Wayne C. Booth in his 1961 book *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Ever since Wayne C. Booth explained this concept, it has been considered to be among the basic categories of textual analysis. According to Booth, the distinction between reliable and unreliable narrators is based on the degree and type of distance that separates a given narrator from the implied author of a work. Booth (1983: 158-59) states that "I have called a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does not."

When the narrator is reliable, the reader accepts without any doubt the statements of fact and judgment. However, when the narrator is unreliable, the reader questions or seeks to qualify the aforementioned statements. Thus, following Greta Olson (2003: 93-110), an unreliable narrator reveals an interpretation of events that is somehow different from the author's own interpretation of those events.

Further, Booth (1983: 378) adds that if an author wants the reader to be confused, then unreliable narration may help him. Abrams (1993: 168) defines this type of narrator as the one whose perception, interpretation, and evaluation of the matters he¹ narrates do not coincide with the implicit opinions expressed by the author, which the author expects the alert reader to share. Gargano, regarding Poe's narrators, asserts this: "Poe intends his

¹ We consider pertinent to clarify that the narrators presented by Poe and which we analyse here are always male.

readers to keep their powers of analysis and judgement ever alert; he does not require or desire complete surrender to the experience of the sensations being felt by his characters.” (Gargano, 2004: 825).

On his part, Baldick (2001: 268) identifies the unreliable narrator as the one whose account of events seems to be faulty, misleadingly biased, or distorted. Thus, it departs from the true understanding of events shared between the reader and the implied author. It is significant that many of the narrators in Poe's works have descended into the madness. In fact, in some occasions, they assert without any hint of vacillation that they have lost their minds, most of the time due to the uncanny facts that they are about to narrate. Indeed Poe himself, in a letter in which he comments his suffering after his wife Virginia Clemm's death, holds this: *“I became insane, with long intervals of horrible sanity.”*² Facing a narrator who does not define himself as unreliable at the beginning of the story, we can guess that the facts that he will tell us next are not completely true. There can be some exaggerations, fantasies, hallucinations, in a way that his testimony seems unacceptable. E. A. Poe does not use madness to give authenticity to the unbelievable; that is simply a technique to justify the irrationality of the upcoming narrator's testimony or confession. In any case, Edgar Allan Poe's use of madness is the highest form of intelligence. Moreover, in some occasions it can lead the protagonist to his downfall, as happens in “The Tell-Tale Heart”.

Lying, hiding information, judging in a wrong way and, as a consequence, confusing the nature of the facts narrated to the reader, are parts of the universe of the unreliable narrator (McCoppin, 2012). Telling about oneself that you are not mad –reported information that have not been required– makes the reader call into question the narrator's declaration. This is the way, facing any of Poe's narrations, in the first paragraph where the narrator usually betrays himself trying to hide his own madness. Thus, we can interpret that the amazing facts that are about to be narrated maybe could be explained as the result of a delirious mind. In spite of the fact that one may think that the narrators lie, it's just the opposite, they tell a truth that only gets validity inside the frame of the madness and that frequently results unacceptable to reasoning. Furthermore, it is more than possible that the homodiegetic narrator –that is, a narrator who is also the main character in the storyworld (Martens, 2008: 79)– is so weak that he does not perceive the reality just as it is, he gets really confused and all this finally leads him to

² Taken from <https://www.eapoe.org/works/letters/p4801040.htm> (retrieved from the Internet on January 23rd, 2019).

madness. Particularly, we refer to the weakness of the protagonist of “The Pit and the Pendulum”. His weakness confuses him and he confuses us. It is not reliable although he is not really lying. He is weak and he does not accept the surrounding reality. He has a fragmented, limited vision of his situation due to his mental, physical state for having been tortured; and what is more, he is in complete darkness most of the time.

What Poe brings to light in the first paragraphs is that the inexplicable facts, in the story, belong to a higher dimension of reality, and that is only accessible through madness. Some critics as Brett Zimmerman point out that, although the term did not indeed exist in Poe’s days, several of the narrators suffered from a case of schizophrenia. Throughout the short stories, several of the signs fit inside this psychological profile: the sound and auditory hallucinations, his inability to recognize the real facts from the imaginary ones, etc. (Zimmerman, 1992: 40-41). From his view, Robert Shulman (1970: 261) points out that Poe, in his short stories, gives an anatomy of the psychological paralysis that in a claustrophobic way is trapped in his own depth of insanity that is fighting in vain to release himself from unknown and threatening forces (May, 1991).

E. A. Poe does not make any effort to hide his belief that madness is, or could be, the highest state of consciousness. In fact, he holds that view very often, from “Ligeia” to “Berenice”, going through “Anabel Lee” to “The Fall of the House of Usher” and, as we will reveal with examples, in the stories we are going to analyse throughout this research.

The purpose of this contribution is to analyse several of the techniques that Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) controls and uses masterfully in some of his works and the incomparable processes that he defines with the intention of designing what he calls an unreliable narrator. Regarding this resource, it is undeniable that his way of writing manages to surprise, terrify, mislead, etc. the reader. As we will see through these pages, Poe uses this resource with the intention of building a world full of suspense, and, what is more, with the intention of catching the reader’s soul and carrying it to the hell of the narrator’s mind. The reader wonders what it is true and what is not. In this contribution we are going to analyse Poe’s writing, and his techniques, in short, to the grotesque, the distorted, the dreadful and the uncanny, which are intimately connected. For Laura Kranzler, this last concept, a key to understand Poe, refers to “the shadowy world that is the complex underbelly of familiar experience” (in Gaskell, 2000: xi)..

2. THE UNCANNY IN POE'S WRITING

The German word *Unheimliche* is considered as untranslatable; the equivalent term in English, *uncanny*, is by itself difficult to define. This indescribable quality is in fact an integral part of the understanding of the uncanny experiences. These recurrent topics that activate our more primitive desires and fears are the true signature of this kind of fiction.

According to Freud's description, the uncanny represents "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (1985: 340); in other words, it projects its terror not only from something external or externally unknown, but, on the contrary, from something strangely familiar which avoids our efforts to separate us from the origin of that terror. Freud argues that an author can evoke an uncanny answer in the reader when he places the action between the boundary of reality and unreality inside fiction itself; for these purposes, Freud treats the uncanny as a psychological fact and at the same time as a literary one. Focusing on Poe, in very few authors one is able to find with so much accuracy the boundaries between fantasy, unreality and reality itself.

When a story is narrated, one of the most useful elements to make the reader feel uncanny effects is to create a sense of distrust and uncertainty in the reader about whether a certain character is good or bad, real or unreal, sane or insane, and do it in order that this attention is not centred directly on that doubt so that we cannot explain that matter. The hesitation of the certainty about what one sees is the essence of Poe's productions with which he manipulates the capability of the reader's reasoning (Shen, 2008: 321-45.). On the one hand, a character perceives (or thinks he does) extraordinary things that perhaps are hallucinations projected by his own mind; on the other hand, it is possible that some common elements hide under the most banal appearance a second disturbing, mysterious, terrible nature.

The fear of the uncanny appears when we face the disguised and distorted images of our repressed desire. It is possible that terror derives simply and directly from our own feelings of fear, pain or death, the threats that can harm us or that we simply do not recognize. The intensity of the emotions that are produced by the supernatural creates doubts and confusion. For Kilgour, in his book *The Rise of the Gothic Novel* (1995), by means of the uncanny something becomes estranged from us.

The uncanny appears as a breakdown of the universal coherence; an aggression (threatening) is produced that breaks the stability of a world in which the laws were

considered as rigorous and unchangeable until then. The impossible occurs without warning in a world where it was believed that the impossible was dismissed by its own nature. Caillois (1967: 9-10) asserts that its essence is the appearance, what cannot happen and despite everything it happens, in a precise moment, in the middle of a known universe and in which it was thought mystery was excluded. Everything seems to be peaceful, without anything unusual, and suddenly the unacceptable is suggested or it is displayed unexpectedly. For Ana M^a Barrenechea (1985: 48), a violation of the worldly, natural or logical order takes place; the strange is everything that on the level of the natural or supernatural, physical or metaphysical is considered out of what is socioculturally accepted.

Some critics (Tatar, 1981; Madden, 1993; Royle, 2003; Schöpp, 2006; Windsor, 2019) maintain that Poe is able to intensify the emotional impact of the feeling of the uncanny in his works to unsuspected limits. In these terms, Freud points out some ideas about the relation between the uncanny in real life and in literature: "...many things that would be uncanny if they occurred in real life are not uncanny in literature, and that in literature there are many opportunities to achieve uncanny effects that are absent in real life" (cited in Chieffalo, 2001: 15).

The essence of the uncanny is connected to the concept of the unreliable narrator (the rational versus the irrational, the natural versus the supernatural), they are dimensions that at the same time are mingled in a surprising and strange way from the main character and the reader's perspective who are living the experience of that tension and/or conflict (Herrero, 1998: 27). Just as professor Herrero pointed out, this can be read in Rosemary Jackson's words, who, before in time, asserts that "It has to do with inverting elements of this world, re-combining its constitutive features in new relations to produce something strange, unfamiliar and *apparently* 'new', absolutely 'other' and different" (1981: 8).

In the short stories we are going to analyse, Poe introduces common characters; thus, there is a taste for the real, that is, according to Sancho Cremades, the emphasis on daily life is typical of the terror during all historical times (1995: 381). Even worse is the fact that the agents of terror are found in our closest surroundings. Horror, if set up in a familiar environment and close to the reader, is much more fearful since it provides the feeling that it can happen to him at any time. Poe introduces *common* characters (with whom the reader could identify himself), happening horrible things, in a *familiar* environment (such as a house similar to that to the reader's, or with *nice* neighbours such

as those of the reader's...). We are not so afraid of a seven-headed dragon as of a sweet and affectionate man since we plainly know we will never meet the former, where the latter is really possible.

3. THE RATIONAL AND THE IRRATIONAL IN POE'S STORIES

Focusing on the historical context that frame Poe's stories, we should highlight the fact that the atmosphere of that period was favourable for the exploration of the two sides of the humanity: the rational thought and the belief in the supernatural. The rationalist position holds that human reason is the supreme tool to understand and rule the world. Man, accompanied by reason, becomes independent from God and from religion; moreover, everything that evokes any religious postulate or beliefs is rejected. All natural and social events can be explained only by the intervention of reason. Thus, many of the popular beliefs that have been steadily maintained during many centuries are rejected by rationalism and they are considered as simple superstitions typical of ignorant people.

María Teresa Ramos González asserts that in this age rationalism and irrational beliefs coexist and at the same time they reject each other, because their conception of reality is the opposite from one to the other. And, it turns out that the second trend is a reaction against the scientific and deterministic vision of the first one (1988: 42). In this sense, this type of literature is an exaltation of the irrational, in which the inexplicable and supernatural mystery shatters our assumptions about the world and reality, our belief in the scientific laws that rationally rule (or at least that is what is expected) the universe, and opens the abyss, the chaos, under our feet (Pardo García, 1992: 145).

Giving light to this point, Rosemary Jackson considers that this literature brings in "something completely other and unseen, the spaces outside the limiting frame of the *human* and the *real*, outside the control of the *word* and the *look*" (1981: 179). Her position consists of introducing what it is called *otherness*. The emergence of works where the double is fundamental coincide wholly with some consequences that include a desire of subvert reality (1981: 4).

At this point, it is essential to consider these ideas from a new and complementary point of view: the artistic manifestation of the fears and consciousness of human beings. Thus, we cannot avoid referring, perhaps concisely, to the literary and artistic perspective that comes as a last resort from the revolution and the impregnated the consciousness during the period that preceded romanticism: we are regarding, obviously, to the Enlightenment.

It would be a good example of this relation between the perception and use of the play between consciousness and unconsciousness of human mind and the creation of an unreal nightmarish world that affects the feelings of the people who read a story or contemplate an artistic painting. Now we can recall the ideas that Goya expressed in his etching “El sueño de la razón produce monstruos” (1799).³

It is precisely the eagerness of understanding and reasoning reality to its last consequences what leads the reader to the rediscovery of the artistic genre that Poe masterfully ruled. The beliefs in the past are rejected, and this literature needs the involvement of the reader, the suspension of his disbelief in order to provoke fear. The dream of reason produces literary monsters in which we can conjure up the spirits of personal fears. Since 1793, Goya executes his series of *Caprichos*, populated by threatening monsters. Nevertheless, the existence of these beings is not objective: they are inside ourselves, at the inner depths of our subconscious and, they break away from it as soon as our logical intelligence rests. For modern man, monsters in general are not only terrifying because they exist, but because they carry out their fears and their most secret desires.

Poe's literature is not directed to a superstitious audience which believes in ghosts and supernatural beings. His readers accept the rules of the game that propose the new genre (“and if it would be true that...”)

First, the reader is conditioned to consider the world of the characters as a universe of real people and it makes him doubt about whether it is truthful or a supernatural explanation of the events that occurred. Secondly, this doubt is also experienced by a character; in this way, the roll of the reader is identified the real intentions or features that have any relation to the narrator and the plot in order to find clues to the best understanding of the story. This explains that one of the most favourite narrative techniques would be the narration in first person. Thirdly, the reader adopts a determined attitude to the text: realistic interpretation and explanation of the events (Todorov, 1970).

Tzvetan Todorov, in his *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (1970), holds that one essential feature is precisely astonishment when facing an incredible fact, indecision between a rational and realistic explanation, and acceptance of the supernatural.

Regarding the topic of the double which we have mentioned, this was dealt with by Otto Rank in an essay (1914). Rank looked into the connections that the double has with the

³ It can be accessed via <https://www.museodelprado.es/coleccion/obra-de-arte/el-sueo-de-la-razon-produce-monstruos/e4845219-9365-4b36-8c89-3146dc34f280> (retrieved from the Internet on February 18th, 2020).

reflections in the mirrors, with the shadows, with the guardian spirits, with the belief in the existence of the soul and with the fear to death. The technique of the *doppelgänger* is described as a reflection or duality of a character's identity, it refers to its twin, its double shadow, its double demon, the double personality (Snodgrass, 2005). The double has become an element of terror, the same way after the collapse of religion gods became demons.

The figure of the double can be analysed not only from the psychological point of view, but also as a contrast, as a duality, as a figure that is projected in a mirror where the reflection emerges as a unit with two different faces, that sometimes takes us to a surprising similarity, obsessive, exasperating. In Antonio Ballesteros González's words, "*el desdoblamiento de la personalidad y sus consecuentes más inmediatos son elementos privilegiados de toda manifestación de la literatura fantástica*" (1992: 136).

Many people experience a sense of the uncanny to the highest degree in relation to death and dead people, with the return of the dead and with the spirits and the ghosts. However, there is hardly any other topic such as death where our thoughts and feelings have almost not changed since the beginning of time and where the ways have been so completely under a weak disguise.

The situation is modified as soon as the writer presents the story inside the world of common reality. In this case he will also accept all the conditions in order to produce uncanny feelings in real life; and all that could have an uncanny effect in reality is present in his story. But in this case he can increase the effect –and indeed multiply it– going further than what could happen in reality, by introducing events that never, or almost never, factually occur. Doing this, he is, in some way, handing us over to the superstition that we had surpassed in an evident way; he misleads us promising to give us the whole truth and, in the end, overtaking it. We react to his inventions as we would have reacted to the real experiences; but by the time we have realised about his deception it is too late and the author has achieved his purpose. Poe's narrations make us think if what we perceived, fiction, is not at last, the reality (Penzoldt, 1965: 16). Therefore, we are presented a burst of supernatural in the real world, an intrusion of mystery in everyday life, a breakdown of the recognizable order, "*una irrupción de lo inadmisible en el seno de la inalterable legalidad cotidiana*" (Caillois, 1965: 36). Poe demonstrates that the macabre can happen at any time and in any place.

4. THE UNRELIABLE NARRATOR

As we have pointed out before, this research is going to be focused in the previously referred works from Edgar Allan Poe. He was an American author who lived during the first part of XIXth century and who managed to leave his footprint in the history of universal literature. The works which we are going to deal with are his essay "The Philosophy of Composition", his poem "Annabel Lee" and four of his most famous and significant short stories: "The Pit and the Pendulum", "The Black Cat", "The Cask of Amontillado" and "The Tell-Tale Heart".

The reasons we have chosen these works for this research are explained below. In the essay "The Philosophy of Composition", Poe defines and details his artistic and creative theory whose conception allowed him to design, mould and build his short stories and poems. This essay is of great interest since we can see how the author, meticulously, looks after the election of the settings, characters, language and many other elements to influence the reader, direct his attention to the author's interests, manipulate his spirit and disposition to a specific goal with the intention of provoking in him the desired effect as we will see later. Poe does not leave anything left to chance and that is what he manifests explicitly in his essay.

We have included the poem "Annabel Lee" as a paradigmatic example to be analysed from the same point of view as the other narrative works. We will show and give an example of Poe's writing skills. Within the wide range of possibilities to choose from among the vast amount of Edgar Allan Poe's works, we selected the works above mentioned, as they present many examples for analysis.

There is no doubt that Poe was the one who gave literature a psychological appearance without any precedent in English language narrative. The American writer either created a series of psychologically tormented characters or he played in his productions with possible subjective interpretations: "Tension is often created in Poe's tales by the dichotomy between the rational tone which the narrator adopts, and the perverse, irrational nature of unconscious mind which the narrative reveals" (Walker, 1993: 120).

Consequently, focusing on the narrator, we must say that the fact that a story is written in first person gives strength and some aspects that could not be achieved in another way. We can quote David Roas' words in which he makes reference to this type of narrators and the effect that it provokes in a text: "*... la utilización del narrador-protagonista va a causar siempre un mayor efecto emocional sobre el lector que el que pueda generar un narrador*

extradieético-heterodieético" (Roas, 2011: 21). Hence, in all of them we will analyse the figure of the narrator and assess if it has any hidden interest or if we can find any intention of manipulating the reader. The confidence of the reader will depend on the conclusions observed about the narrator's psychology and credibility found in the story or the confession in some cases thereby putting in doubt what he is reading. This fact entails a fairly interesting game between the narrator and the reader, because the reader validates all the arguments and explanations of the narrative voice, but he is immersed in an continuous analysis of reality searching for the truth which is not very clear at all times (Rein, 1960; Gargano, 2004; Shen, 2008; Alber et. al., 2010).

Poe is a groundbreaking writer with his tales of mystery since he diminishes importance to the classic gothic elements that had been used since the origin of the genre. Not only does he inspire horror through supernatural elements, haunted houses, medieval ruined castles or ghosts which torment the characters of the stories; he goes well beyond and introduces with great skill the daily terrors and the domestic horror that surrounds us in our daily life that at the beginning, we do not see it as a threat. True scary stories work and achieve their purposes if they get the reader to put aside his incredulity and, what it is as important or even more than this, abandon his own daily fears for a while.

We –or our primitive forefathers– once believed in the possibility of these things and were convinced that they really happened. Nowadays we no longer believe in them... but we do not feel quite sure of our new set of beliefs, and the old ones still exist within us ready to seize upon any confirmation (Bloom, 1998: 290).

As we will see in the development of this research, some narrators will show us their story from the perspective of a psychopath. In this way, through the sensory stimulus that he uses so well in his short stories as in this closeness and everyday nature of evil personified in people of our close environment, Poe is able to exponentially increase the horror the reader feels while he is delving in as a witness or accomplice, inside the universe that the author defines and makes us tremble.

5 VISUAL AND HEARING PERCEPTION AS A TRIGGER OF THE UNRELIABLE NARRATOR

In this point of our analysis, we are going to see how the perception of these sensitive stimuli affect the credibility given to the narration by the reader and, definitely, to the (double or not) narrator's intention.

Attending to the definition given in the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* about the term unreliable narrator, we can say that the description of this kind of narrator matches mainly the one used by Poe:

A narrator whose account of events appears to be faulty, misleadingly biased, or otherwise distorted, so that it departs from the "true" understanding of events shared between the reader and the implied author... The term does not necessarily mean that such a narrator is morally untrustworthy or a habitual liar (although this may be true in some cases), since the category also includes harmlessly naïve, "fallible", or ill-informed narrators.⁴

On the one hand, we can highlight that in "The Pit and the Pendulum" we find a person whose health is affected due to the torture and confinement he is suffering. Awakening after the shock of receiving a death sentence in the Spanish Inquisition, the narrator first seeks to gather his mental abilities before trying to gather his physical abilities (Ballengee, 2008: 27). To create a sense of doubt in the reader, Poe never makes clear the "narrator's particular crime, nor is it indicated that he himself knows his crime" (Ballengee, 2008: 30). Poe reinforces the unreliability of the narrator due to his mental and physical state; "isolated within his dungeon chamber, the narrator undergoes horrifying bodily discomfort and pain that simultaneously suggest and provoke an experience that eludes rational knowledge and communicability" (Ballengee, 2008: 30).

Right from the very beginning it is made clear that the character's senses are abandoning him: "I was sick — sick unto death with that long agony; and when they at length unbound me, and I was permitted to sit, I felt that my senses were leaving me." (Mabbott, 1978a, 681)⁵ Thus, he explains to us how he feels physically. He also gives details that his death sentence was the last auditory stimulus he perceived and, from that instant, he can see how the inquisitors move their lips but he was not able to grasp any sound. He discerns an uncertain reality among the shadows, the weakness and the loss of the conscience he suffers in some moments. He is not able to see with a clear mind the reality that surrounds him and he spends a good part of his confinement investigating his surroundings.

⁴ Taken from

https://literature.proquest.com/searchFulltext.do?id=R04454571&divLevel=0&queryId=3096997849985&trailId=167EF3BADB2&area=ref&forward=critref_ft (retrieved from the Internet on January 28th, 2019).

⁵ For all Poe's quotes, we have followed Mabbott's edition project, which can be consulted online at: <https://www.eapoe.org/works/mabbott/tominfo.htm> (retrieved from the Internet on January 28th, 2019).

Sometimes he touches the walls and at others he tries to guess the depth of the well which he discovers when he is about to fall down the well. Due to the *fallacy of the senses*, he gives us mistaken information that comes from the distorted information provided by his own senses. He does not want to confuse us but, undoubtedly, the reader guesses he cannot trust him because he is very confused.

Poe gives another perspective completely different when the narrator is a murderer as in the other short stories we are studying. As readers, we perceive some contradictions and incoherence inside the narration. In some occasions, as in "The Tell-Tale Heart", the narrator makes a series of assertions based on his hearing sense. These clues warn us that we cannot trust him too much: "The disease had sharpened my senses — not destroyed — not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth." (Mabbott, 1978c, 792) The narrator considers his hypersensitivity as a unique feature that makes him special and he does not consider it as clear evidence of his mental disorder. At the story progresses, we can see how the visual perception and, over all, the auditory one, are increasing in importance. On the one side, an obsession is awakened towards the old man that, supposedly, comes from the feelings provoked by one of the old man's eyes: "I think it was his eye! yes, it was this! One of his eyes resembled that of a vulture — a pale blue eye, with a film over it." (Mabbott, 1978c, 792) Moreover, when he commits the crime he starts to listen to, even stronger, the old dead man's beating heart. Thus the reader knows that it is an impossible fact and that sound only exists inside his mind, mistrusting everything coming from the narrator. There are many examples we could choose to demonstrate that he is completely convinced that he is listening to the old dead man's heart. Indeed if he has been dismembered and confined: "But the beating grew louder, louder! I thought the heart must burst. And now a new anxiety seized me — the sound would be heard by a neighbor!" (Mabbott, 1978c, 795).

The visual perception that Poe uses in the story "The Black Cat" reveals that the narrator is not telling us the truth. We know this because we realize that although some facts can be considered as supernatural, the source of that information comes from the narrator's perception affected by a mental illness and overwhelmed by his own emotions. It is important to note that we know he is an alcoholic and that leads us to doubt all he is describing.

When his house burns and the walls fall down, with the exception of one of them, we can observe on its surface a stain in which something completely unexpected and unbelievable

appears: "The impression was given with an accuracy truly marvellous. There was a rope about the animal's neck." (Mabbott, 1978d, 853) But, was it really a gigantic figure? The narrator, in his effort to find a logical explanation for the fact (and remove any sense of guilt if he may have) sees its shape was engraved on the wall. However, if this were true, it would not justify that the stain could be as big as he suggests. The reader finds here one more of the narrator's numerous incongruities and he understands that is inside the narrator's mind where the image takes on such great dimension.

And, finally, in the story "The Cask of Amontillado" it is not precisely the visual and auditory stimuli that are connected to the fact that the reader mistrusts the narrative voice. There are other different reasons besides the sensorial factors. Effectively, the reader considers him as an unreliable narrator, but for some reasons we are going to analyse later in this research.

6. MISTRUST AS A WITTY DEVICE TO REINFORCE THE UNRELIABLE NARRATOR

If in the previous section of this research we have mentioned some aspects related to the narrator's credibility basing our thoughts on his physical perceptions, from now on we are going to search the credibility from a new point of view. We will focus our attention on the reasons that cause mistrust in the reader by different narrators (Walsh, 1997: 495-513). We will examine short stories as well as the poem "Annabel Lee" since the poem is written in first person.

Whereas several readers could read this poetic composition as a declaration of eternal love, our goal will be to analyse the narrator's psychology. In order to do that, we will focus our attention on the lover's anger and the strange behaviour he exhibits as the poem progresses.

The sweet and peaceful tone of the first lines induces the reader to think that he is facing a fairy tale. However, in the second stanza, the narrator asserts that indeed the angels were jealous of their love: "With a love that the wingéd seraphs in Heaven / Coveted her and me." (Mabbott, 1969, 477)

Little by little, we are convinced of the narrator's paranoid state of mind when in the fourth stanza he says "as all men know" and refers to the idea that these angels killed her lover:

*The angels, not half so happy in Heaven,
Went envying her and me*

*Yes! — that was the reason (as all men know,
In this kingdom by the sea)
That the wind came out of the cloud by night,
Chilling and killing my Annabel Lee.” (Mabbott, 1969, 478)*

The fears and suppositions about the narrator's demential condition due to the mourning and pain that he feels are so deep rooted and are accentuated when we discover at the end of the poem that the narrator sleeps close to the deceased's grave.

*And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side
Of my darling — my darling — my life and my bride,
In her sepulchre there by the sea —
In her tomb by the sounding sea. (Mabbott, 1969, 478)*

The separation from the woman he loves makes him gradually lose his capability of reasoning. Thus, the soft and pleasant initial atmosphere is changing into darkness, at the same time that the narrator's reliability is vanishing.

Let us study the narrators' actions and the personality in some of his stories. In these works written by Poe, the narrator's personality is declared through the language and the tone he uses and the acts he commits. All these, help us to uncover his true intentions. Personality will be a key element to discover if the characters' testimonies are real or have been manipulated and we cannot assume their veracity.

In “The Tell-Tale Heart” and “The Cask of Amontillado” the characters try to show us their reasons to commit the crime. Once we reach this point and have verified that these motives are baseless –since Fortunato's injuries and the old man's strange eye are not true reasons to commit a murder– the narrators' sanity is called into question (Kennedy, 2016: 541). It is the notion, realization and assumption of irrationality by a narrator who is rationalizing his actions that is most discomforting to readers. Poe is a master at creating narrators who force readers to question the nature of sanity, by focusing on the narrator's mental and physical status while hardly placing mental and emotional stress on the reader.

It's revealing that in the first paragraph of “The Tell-Tale Heart” in which the narrator starts with the strong assertion that he is not mad, really, he is warning the reader that the simple fact of defending his sanity makes him seem to be mentally disordered:

TRUE! [sic] — nervous — very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses — not destroyed — not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad? Hearken! and observe how healthily — how calmly I can tell you the whole story. (Mabbott, 1978c, 792)

In the same paragraph we find another incongruity: he tells us that he is very nervous and he ends asserting that he is about to expose his story in a “healthy” and “calmy” way.

Regarding this, Gargano makes a correct assertion about this narrator due to the way in which he defends his own sanity and he brings us into “his” story: “The sharp exclamations, nervous questions, and broken sentences almost too blatantly advertise Poe’s conscious intention; the protagonist’s painful insistence [on] “proving” himself sane only serves to intensify the idea of his madness” (2004: 825).

It is obvious that the protagonist of the story is obsessed with the old man’s eye, killing him finally but without any reasonable motive or regret. He delights himself about the extraordinary way he designed his plan and how he concealed his terrible intentions when confronting the old man. He realizes that he was never as kind to him than during the week when, night after night, he tried to kill him until he did. Also he emits loud laughs while he explains the macabre details of his crime: “A tub had caught all — ha! ha!” (Mabbott, 1978c, 796) At the end of the narration it is amazing when the protagonist and narrator’s mental instability and stress make him listen to the heartbeats of the dead, dismembered old man’s heart which is hidden under the floor boards.

Criticism (Spiekermann, 2007) focuses on the state of mind of the narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart”; whether or not he is perceived to be insane, or whether his act of murder and subsequent attempt to convince the reader of his mental stability can in fact be attributed to the mind of a sane man. Through the narrative, the readers are in a position that is close to the narrator; he is the source of all information received by the reader, and can manipulate his recollection of events, emotions, and perceived traits at will; everything that we come to understand in terms of the events of the tale, the narrator’s actions, are through a specific lens, one of which readers have little comprehension. The narrator shows a lack of believability throughout the narrative, not the least of which is when he is attempting to find a motive for his murder. It seems that the judgements made on this narrator by the reader, by us, as being insane are made entirely on the picture painted by the narrator himself. Zunshine (2006: 125-7) suggests that we import the figure of an

unreliable narrator because we need to frame a pattern of textual ambiguities... projection of the unreliable narrator can be seen as a result of the reader's pragmatic interpretation of textual elements within their specific literary context.

Therefore, thanks to these details, it is unveiled from the very beginning that we are facing an unreliable narrator.

The reading of the first chapter of the story "The Black Cat" also warns us about the fact that the narrator does not ask for or expect to be believed. Indeed, he expresses that his mental condition is healthy. In the reader, as well as in the narration mentioned above, a sense of mistrust is awakened by the words coming from the narrator defending his sanity.

FOR [sic] the most wild, yet most homely narrative which I am about to pen, I neither expect nor solicit belief. Mad indeed would I be to expect it, in a case where my very senses reject their own evidence. Yet, mad am I not — and very surely do I not dream. (Mabbot, 1978d, 849)

The narrator assumes the reality and the facts that are happening in his home not as if it was his fault, but as an external threat. He does not recognise that the problem comes from its own mind just as Shulman (1970: 251) explains. He states that it is irrational because the narrator establishes that the cat has been responsible of his wife's murder. In this way, the narrator hides the true motives for which he has decided to end his wife's life (Shulman, 1970: 257).

In this same vein, he tries to direct the attention of the reader to what he calls "the Fiend Intemperance" that consists of blaming alcohol for part of his own violence.

Our friendship lasted, in this manner, for several years, during which my general temperament and character — through the instrumentality of the Fiend Intemperance — had (I blush to confess it) experienced a radical alteration for the worse. I grew, day by day, more moody, more irritable, more regardless of the feelings of others. I suffered myself to use intemperate language to my wife. At length, I even offered her personal violence. (Mabbot, 1978d, 851)

The way in which he has to tell what happens creates some reasonable doubts to suspect about if we should trust him or not. In this story we gradually see the transformation of a human being who defines himself as a kind-hearted lover of the animals and his wife. Later we will see that through his acts and his own words, we are really facing a monster who tries to justify his crime manipulating his discourse. He tries in this way to excuse his

legal faults, not his spiritual stain just because he has never demonstrated any hint of feeling regret or remorse.

In Magistrale's words we find some of these motives compiled that provoke mistrust in the reader: "The narrator's alcoholism, his propensity for violent behaviour, his acute isolation, and his volatile temper are all characteristics of perverseness, that is, they are reflective of self-destructive behaviour." (2001: 87)

Finally, we will discuss all the aspects related to the narrator of "The Cask of Amontillado". In spite of the fact that this short story has also a homodiegetic narrator who murders another human being and narrates the history for us in first person, there are various differences that contrast with the two stories we have previously discussed.

The main feature we would like to highlight is that this is a story of vengeance. However, it is not an impulsive and passionate vengeance committed when the murderer feels that he has been offended or disturbed in that very moment, but a cold and extremely well calculated revenge. We don't know if the motives of this settling of scores are so serious to produce so much hate toward Fortunato or if it is simply an unhealthy obsession. The narrator starts his narration talking about the vengeance and his decided intention of punishing someone he considers as his enemy. He is determined to do it in a way in which the crime remains unpunished.

The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could; but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge. You, who so well know the nature of my soul, will not suppose, however, that I gave utterance to a threat. At length I would be avenged; this was a point definitively settled — but the very definitiveness with which it was resolved precluded the idea of risk. I must not only punish, but punish with impunity. (Mabbott, 1978e, 1256)

The reader realizes that Montresor behaves hypocritically towards Fortunato whom he calls a friend several times and pretends to be worried about his health. We also guess that he is intelligent and that he has thought/calculated about every single detail. For example, he has hidden the mortar to cover the wall and brick in his *friend* Fortunato. His attitude toward him is mean and he also lies to his victim-friend; first, the narrator convinces Fortunato to go with him, then to drink even more, in order to be easier to manipulate him and continue going into the deepest part of the crypts of the *palazzo*. That is why, added to a condemnation and thirsty for vengeance, the reader realizes that this narrator tends to the machination and that he has a low level of morality.

Based on everything said above, we can value the importance of making an exercise of criticism based on the narrator's words and attitude in order to understand what is really happening in the story. Besides, we have to take into account different factors as their intelligence, interests, limitations, fears, obsessions... and many details that can help to increase the information we are compiling.

7. CONCLUSIONS

By creating all these narrators, who are unavoidably unreliable, Poe forces the reader to question the validity of everything within the stories. In doing so, readers are left with a sense of uneasiness and a need to question the world around them. After finishing reading Poe's productions, readers are undoubtedly close to crossing the line between sane and insane.

It is clear that Poe is right using this type of narrators to give an important dramatic effect to the reader, catching and getting him closer when he feels that he is inside the story.

In other words, Poe gets the reader not only to read and imagine all that happens in a story, but also the author makes the reader analyse all the data that has been given to him, since he is aware of the fact that he is facing an unreliable narrator who, either he does not realize what is happening or he is manipulating the facts he is narrating for his own interest.

Poe's narrations make us think if what we perceived, fiction, is not at last, the reality. Therefore, we are presented a burst of supernatural in the real world, an intrusion of mystery in everyday life, a breakdown of the recognizable order. Poe demonstrates that the macabre can happen at any time and in any place.

The common features in Poe's texts, thus, consist in putting at the forefront both visual and auditory suggestion. The true topic is the reality about what we can see and hear: believe or not believe, discern another haunted and hellish world behind the daily appearance. It seems his productions are meant to enter through the eyes and ears, to be limited to a succession of images. It is not surprising that cinema has been fuelled so much from these stories.

Once the short stories have been read, it is clearly observed that one of the highlighted features and that stands out because it is a characteristic of the narrators' psychological field, is the ambivalence and duality. We have to specify here that in some moments (and why not in all the stories?) the duality not only is circumscribed to the story, but also

sometimes affects the reader-narrator binomial. Therefore, the universe of fiction of the work is not kept inside itself, but it is projected outside.

The narrators of Poe's writings shown here provide clear examples of an unreliable narrator. The narrator's unreliability relies on his attempts to confuse the reader, to digress and thus hide the relevant information. The study has further shown that the narrator is unreliable due to his accumulation of direct addresses to the reader and his conscious attempts to direct the reader's sympathy.

At another point, the analysis of the textual signals in the story has proved that the narrator is unreliable because of the frequent discrepancies between his statements and actions. The many textual signals included in the discourse create a distance between narrator and reader. Unreliable narrators are used to generate a sudden and unexpected reaction in readers, usually by a final and impressive plot-twist. One effective way of achieving that outcome is by leading the reader to blindly trust in what the narrator is telling.

Finally, we turn the floor over to Edgar Allan Poe, with this simple and natural but categorical quote from the short story "Eleonora": "Men have called me mad; but the question is not yet settled, whether madness is or is not the loftiest intelligence..." (Mabbott, 1978a, 638).

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Orlando: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1993.

Alber, J., Iverson, S., Skov Nielsen, H., & Richardson, B. "Unnatural Narratives, Unnatural Narratology: Beyond Mimetic Models". *Narrative*. 2010, 18, 2, 113-36.

Baldick, C. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Oxford: OUP, 2001.

Ballengee, J. R. "Torture, Modern Experience, and Beauty in Poe's 'The Pit and the Pendulum'", *Modern Language Studies* 38.1. 2008, 26-43.

Ballesteros González, A. (1992) "El canon en la literatura fantástica", *Revista del departamento de Filología Moderna*. Nº 2 y 3. Ciudad Real: Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, 1992, 131-143.

Barrenechea, A. M^a "La literatura fantástica: función de los códigos socioculturales en la constitución de un género". *El espacio crítico en el discurso literario*. Buenos Aires: Kapelusz, 1985, 45-54.

- Bloom**, C. *Gothic Horror: A Reader's Guide from Poe to King and Beyond*. (ed.), London: Macmillan, 1998.
- Booth**, W. C. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983.
- Caillois**, R. *Au coeur du fantastique*. Paris: Gallimard, 1965.
- Caillois**, R. *Antología del cuento fantástico*. Buenos Aires: Ed. Sudamericana, 1967.
- Chieffalo**, A. C. *Poe, Lovecraft and the uncanny: the horror of the self*. Connecticut : Central Connecticut State University. 2011.
- Freud**, S. *Art and Literature*. Albert Dickson, (ed.), Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985.
- Gargano**, J. W. "The Question of Poe' Narrators". G.R. Thompson (ed.), *The Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*. New York: Norton, 2004, 823-29.
- Gaskell**, E. *Gothic Tales*. Laura Kranzler, (ed. & intr). London: Penguin Classics, 2000.
- Herrero Cecilia**, J. "Estrategias discursivas y procedimientos narrativos en el relato fantástico. Análisis de *Le Horla* de Maupassant", *Revista del departamento de Filología Moderna*. 1998, 7, 25-46.
- Jackson**, R. *Fantasy. The Literature of Subversion*. London: Methuen, 1981.
- Kennedy**, J. G. "The Violence of Melancholy: Poe against Himself", *American Literary History* 8.3, 1996, 533-551.
- Kilgour**, M. *The Rise of the Gothic Novel*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Mabbott**, T O (ed.) "Annabel Lee", *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe — Vol. I: Poems*. Cambridge MA: The Beknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969, 468-481.
- Mabbott**, T O (ed.) "Eleonora", *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe — Vol. II: Tales and Sketches*. Cambridge MA: The Beknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1978a, 635-647.
- Mabbott**, T O (ed.) "The Pit and the Pendulum", *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe — Vol. II: Tales and Sketches*. Cambridge MA: The Beknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1978a, 678-700.
- Mabbott**, T O (ed.) "The Tell-Tale Heart", *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe — Vol. III: Tales and Sketches*. Cambridge MA: The Beknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1978c, 789-799.
- Mabbott**, T O (ed.) "The Black Cat", *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe — Vol. III: Tales and Sketches*. Cambridge MA: The Beknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1978d, 847-860.

- Mabbott**, T O (ed.) "The Cask of Amontillado", *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe — Vol. III: Tales and Sketches*. Cambridge MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1978e, 1252-1266.
- Magistrale**, T. *Student Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001.
- Martens**, G. "Revising and Extending the Scope of the Rhetorical Approach to Unreliable Narration". D'hoker, Elke and Gunther Martens (eds.) *Narrative Unreliability in the Twentieth-Century First-Person Novel*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008, 77-105.
- May**, C. *Edgar Allan Poe. A Study of the Short Fiction*. Boston: Twayne, 1991.
- McCoppin**, R. "Horrific Obsessions: Poe's Legacy of the Unreliable and Self-Obsessed Narrator", Perry D.R., Sederholm C.H. (eds) *Adapting Poe*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 105-117.
- Olson**, G. "Reconsidering Unreliability: Fallible and Untrustworthy Narrators" *Narrative*, Vol. 11, 2003, 93-110.
- Pardo García**, P. J. "Misterios, prodigios y problemas: relaciones genéricas entre la ficción fantástica y la policíaca". *Revista del departamento de Filología Moderna*. 1992, 5, 143-159.
- Penzoldt**, P. *The Supernatural in Fiction*. New York: Humanities Press, 1965.
- Poe**, E. A. *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*. London: Penguin Group, 1982.
- Ramos González**, M^a T. *Ficción y fascinación. Literatura fantástica prerromántica francesa*. Valladolid: Servicio de Publicaciones, 1988.
- Rein**, D. M. *Edgar A. Poe: The Inner Pattern*. New York: Philosophical Library, 1960.
- Roas**, D. *La sombra del cuervo. Edgar Allan Poe y la literatura fantástica española del siglo XIX*. Madrid: Devenir, 2011.
- Royle**, N. *The Uncanny*. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Sancho Cremades**, P. "El relato de terror en la cultura de masas". *Tropelías*. 1995, 5 y 6, 371-392.
- Schöpp**, J. C. "'Vast Forms That Move Fantastically': Poe, Freud, and the Uncanny". *Poe Studies*. 2006, 39, 1, 46-54.
- Shen**, D. "Edgar Allan Poe's Aesthetic Theory, the Insanity Debate, and the Ethically Oriented Dynamics of 'The Tell-Tale Heart'". *Nineteenth-Century Literature*. 2008, 63, 3, 321-45.
- Shulman**, R. "Poe and the Powers of the Mind". *ELH*. 1970, 37, 2, 245-262.
- Spiekermann**, L. "Is there an unreliable narrator in Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Tell-Tale Heart'?", Munich: GRIN Verlag, 2007, <https://www.grin.com/document/180522>.

- Snodgrass**, M. E. *Encyclopedia of Gothic Literature*. New York: Facts on File, 2005.
- Tatar**, M. M. "The House of Fiction: Toward a Definition of the Uncanny". *Comparative Literature*. 1981, 33, 2, 167-182.
- Todorov**, T. *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*. Paris: Seuil, 1970.
- Walker**, Ian M. "Edgar Allan Poe". Marcus Cunliffe (ed.), *American Literature to 1900*. London: Penguin, 1993.
- Walsh**, R. "Who Is the Narrator?" *Poetics Today*, 18(4), 495-513, 1997, doi:10.2307/1773184.
- Windsor**, M. "What is the Uncanny?". *The British Journal of Aesthetics*. 2019, 59, 1, Pages 51-65, <https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayy028>.
- Zimmerman**, B. "Moral Insanity" or Paranoid Schizophrenia: Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart". *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*. 1992, 25, 39-48.
- Zunshine**, L. *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel*. Ohio: Ohio State University, 2006.